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MEDICINE—FAULKNER'S GUIDE TO THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

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In *Flags in the Dust*, William Faulkner presents a comparative study of humanity's past, present, and future within the story line of old Bayard's medical problem. Through the role of medicine and the characters involved in Bayard's treatment, Faulkner exposes his pessimistic opinion of the future of medicine and human beings. At issue are not only the remedies and treatments presented, but also the people and their concepts of medicine and their interactions with each other. From the ancient past of Indian tradition and medical lore, to the present concept of medical specialists, Faulkner depicts the changes in people's ability and willingness to share knowledge and compassion with others.

Although Old Man Falls appears very secretive about the ingredients of the salve he uses to treat old Bayard's wen (Faulkner 247), he is generally very open about his feelings and thoughts.¹ The introduction of this old Southerner depicts a sensitive and caring man. Falls returns a pipe that had belonged to Bayard's father, John Sartoris. He expresses his sense of respect that "a po' house ain't no place fer anything of his'n" (6), and gives the pipe to the rightful heir. Fall's eyes "were blue and innocent as a boy's" (83). He is a poor but proud man who wears "clean, faded overalls" (84), and although he accepts Bayard's gifts of a complete outfit of clothing twice a year and frequent offerings of tobacco and peppermint candy, he "would never take money" (83). His pride and honor explain his refusal to reveal the origins of the Indian salve by explaining, "'My granny got that 'ere from a Choctaw woman nigh a hundred year ago. Ain't none of us never told what it air nor left no after trace'" (247). Therefore, he sees it as a duty to keep the secret of the remedy, but he willingly uses it whenever needed without any thoughts of reward or payment. In this way, Falls represents the values of the past. He personifies honor and pride, but without any sense of greed, he is willing to help others. He also believes in the power of the salve which represents the Indian's use of and reliance on nature.

Old Man Falls' ideas and treatments are scorned by the younger generations. Dr. Peabody, the old country doctor, advises Miss Jenny, "You keep him from letting Will Falls put anything on it. It's all right. Just let it alone" (108). Just as Will Falls represents the past with its code of honor and faith in nature, Dr. Peabody represents the

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change in this new present in *Flags*, bridging the gap between the "Old South" and the culture that was developing out of defeat. He is described as the "fattest man in Yocona county" (102). He wears a "shiny alpaca coat" (102) and baggy black trousers. He has a booming voice and "filled the room with his bluff homely humanity" (103). Dr. Peabody has a sense of humor and doesn't seem to take life too seriously—traits that show as he chides the young doctor's surgical enthusiasm by commenting "Folks got along with cancer a long time before they invented knives" (103-104). Dr. Peabody represents the South's acceptance that the old ways had ceased to exist. He is the Southerner who has realized that the present South could no longer survive on Southern pride and honor. Dr. Peabody's personality exhibits the tone of the South, the feeling of complacency and making the best of any situation while attempting to retain a sense of humor. People still matter to Dr. Peabody, and he is well liked in the community. "Everyone in the county knew him, and it was said that he could spend the balance of his days driving about the county in the buckboard he still used, with never a thought for board and lodging and without the expenditure of a penny for either" (102-103). He cares for the people in his community, and "he would start out at any hour of the twenty-four in any weather and for any distance, over practically impassable roads in a lopsided buckboard to visit anyone, white or black, who sent for him; accepting for fee usually a meal of corn pone and coffee or perhaps a small measure of corn or fruit, or a few flower bulbs or graftings" (102). In this period, the Southerners had to depend heavily on each other. Dr. Peabody represents the basic medical knowledge available combined with a generous addition of human compassion. He represents not only a doctor, but also a family friend. He is the person who takes on the responsibility of telling Miss Jenny about young Bayard's death.

Not a medical person, Miss Jenny represents the link between the present and the future in Southern society. Even though she's older than Dr. Peabody, Miss Jenny comments "That Loosh Peabody is as big a fogy as old Will Falls. Old people just fret me to death" (105). She seems to have accepted the fate of her family and her part of the country better than the men around her. She has a sense of getting on with life no matter what conditions exist. She takes Bayard to the new, young doctor with the "impersonal and clean" (99) office. She has no tolerance for living in the past, as Will Falls does. She is more accepting of the present than Dr. Peabody. She is a dominant force in her own family, and she tells the young doctor, "You wait; I'll bring [Bayard] right back here, and we'll finish this business" (105).

However, Miss Jenny typifies the Southern lady's tendency to accept the directives of a man, especially a doctor, in authority. Even against Bayard's wishes, Miss Jenny arranges an appointment with a skin specialist in Memphis. She then argues Bayard into submission, and they travel to Memphis for the appointment. Miss Jenny is a significant character in *Flags in the Dust*. Not only is she an indomitable female, she also is willing to face the future. She is the only member of an older generation to willingly seek out the future and use the offerings of progress.

But Faulkner introduces progress through the new, young Dr. Alford and the Memphis specialist, Dr. Brandt. Dr. Alford is described as having "a sort of preoccupied dignity, a sort of erudite and cold unillusion regarding mankind, about him that precluded the easy intimacy of the small town..." (100). He has a comforting "but cold" (100) face. He examines Bayard with "chill contemplation" and "cold speculation" (101). His manners reflect his impersonality as he speaks "stiffly" and "coldly" (103). In his eminent and up-to-date medical knowledge, Dr. Alford condemns Will Falls as he warns Bayard, "if you let any quack that comes along treat that growth with homemade or patent remedies, you'll be dead in six months" (104). He argues with Dr. Peabody's assessment that the wen should be left alone. "If that growth is not removed immediately, I wash my hands of all responsibility. To neglect it will be as fatal as Mr. Falls' salve. Mrs. Du Pre, I ask you to witness that this consultation has taken this unethical turn through no fault of mine and over my protest" (105). His manner and attitude are not those of a caring physician, but rather those of an insensitive scientist whose only interest is in the treatment, not the patient. Faulkner uses Dr. Alford to represent the cold, uncaring future where concern is for each person's well-being. Dr. Alford's refusal to accept any responsibility predicts the self-centeredness of future generations. To reinforce the example of Dr. Alford, Faulkner gives us the specialist in Memphis, Dr. Brandt.

Dr. Brandt is a "brisk, dapper man, who moved with arrogant jerky motions" (267). He is preoccupied and even unaware that his patient is a man (268). He is evasive and must be cornered by Dr. Alford even to meet Miss Jenny and old Bayard. Faulkner's genius exposes both these arrogant predecessors of future medicine, by ironically timing Bayard's visit to the specialist on July ninth, the day Will Falls told Bayard the wen would fall off. And it does fall off, just when Dr. Brandt begins to touch it. This is a wonderful statement of the power of the past over the arrogant, efficiency of the future, and yet there is poignancy in the

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irony. For in this cold, efficient world, the warmth and hospitality that the South has always shared will suffocate and fade away.

Faulkner accepts progress as inevitable, and exemplifies that inevitability by means of Miss Jenny's attitude toward the younger doctors. But he warns us that the future may not have all the solutions. Like Will Falls' salve, the past offers much of value for humanity, and age should not equate to uselessness. The innovativeness of progress must leave room for sentiment, caring, and honor among each of us. The world will be cold and impersonal if in the future people lose touch with one another. As healers, physicians must not lose sight of the patient when in search of the cure. The knowledge of the future must always be tempered with the values of the past.

NOTE

¹William Faulkner, *Flags in the Dust* (New York, 1974).